

VZCZCXRO7419
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHCI #0526/01 3201239
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 161239Z NOV 06
FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1277
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1141
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0448
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0450
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0281
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0281
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0108
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0217
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1567

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000526

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

PACOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: RULING COALITION LOSES 4 PARLIAMENT SEATS IN 3 DIFFERENT STATES

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11. (U) SUMMARY: On November 6, Congress and its ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) partners lost all four contested seats in Lok Sabha (national parliament) by-elections in Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam. In Bihar, the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won two seats, while in Jharkhand, former Chief Minister Babulal Marandi, running as an independent, won a landslide victory. In Assam, a candidate from the recently-formed Muslim Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) Party easily defeated his Congress rival. The Congress and BJP losses reflect how difficult it is for national parties to deal with complex local politics, including purely local issues, in elections in which regional and communal loyalties increasingly take precedence over ideology. END SUMMARY

12. (U) In Bihar, the by-elections for the Nalanda and Bhagalpur seats were held after the Janata Dal-United (JDU)'s Nitish Kumar and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s Sushil Kumar Modi resigned the seats early in 2006 to serve respectively as Bihar's Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister in the new NDA Bihar government. Congress ally and UPA member Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) lost both seats to the BJP and the JDU. Former Union Civil Aviation Minister and the Muslim face of the BJP Shahnawaz Hussain, won the Bhagalpur seat, defeating RJD candidate Shakuni Chowdhury by nearly 50,000 votes. In Nalanda, it was an easy victory for the JDU's Ram Swarup Prasad, who won 171,592 votes, many more than the combined vote totals of the RJD-backed and former JDU Member of Parliament Arun Kumar (53,840), and Communist Party of India's Gaya Singh (31,915). These latest defeats seem to confirm that Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD party has still not recovered from its November 2005 defeat in the Bihar state assembly elections.

13. (SBU) Contributing to the RJD's loss was Lalu's insistence on fielding candidates against his own UPA allies - Congress, Lok Janata Party (LJP), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), and the Communist Party of India (CPI)--thereby splitting the UPA vote. Lalu's candidates came second in both races. Lalu, sources said, had made it clear to Congress and other allies that he would fight the two seats to establish his influence and to demonstrate that

the UPA had no alternative but to work with the RJD. "His aim was not to win the seats, but to come second and he has achieved it," a Bihar leader said. LJP leader and Union Chemicals and Fertilizer Minister Ram Vilas Paswan told the media after the defeat that "some people were not interested in a unified fight against the NDA." (Comment: Lalu's willingness to "lose" the election is counter-intuitive. Lalu's influence has waned in Bihar recently because his party has been compelled to share power in a coalition. By increasing the strength of his NDA rivals, Lalu feels that he will become the unifying voice of opposition to the right-wing NDA, and easily win the next election. End Comment.)

¶4. (U) The NDA faced a setback of its own in neighboring Jharkhand, as it lost the Koderma seat, the only seat it carried in the 2004 general elections. Former BJP Vice President and the first Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Babulal Marandi, created his own party, the Jharkhand Vikas Manch, after quitting the BJP in May 2006 and resigning his Koderma Lok Sabha seat. Although running as an independent, (his party has not officially registered) Marandi defeated his nearest INC rival by a huge margin of over 194,000 votes. The BJP candidate garnered so few votes that he lost his security deposit.

¶5. (U) The ruling Congress in the state of Assam experienced a shock, as the AUDF candidate Sirajuddin Ajmal won the Jamunamukh seat, defeating his nearest Congress rival by over 14,000 votes. The seat had become a point of prestige between the Assam's INC Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and Assam's Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind President Badruddin Ajmal who heads the AUDF. The by-election was held after Badruddin, who won from two seats, vacated the Jamunamukh seat. The AUDF fielded Sirajuddin, younger brother of Badruddin, who defeated INC candidate Khalilur Rahman. After the victory, AUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal boldly announced to the media that if Congress continues to ignore Muslims in the state, the party will soon be wiped-out.

¶6. (U) The AUDF was formed in November 2005 during the run-up

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to Assam's 2006 state assembly elections. Many of AUDF's leaders are former Congress members upset by what they perceive to be the party's lack of attention to Muslim concerns. Many Muslims had concluded that the Congress Party passively accepted the Indian Supreme Court's July 2005 verdict declaring the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDTA) of 1983 unconstitutional. Only applicable in Assam, the IMDTA had made identification and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, who are mainly Muslims, virtually impossible. Passage of the IMDTA had spurred Muslim votes for Congress. The AUDF's split from and victory over Congress reflects the growing political strength of the Muslim community in Assam.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The recent by-election results demonstrate the need for national parties to pay sufficient heed to the increasing complexity and relevance of local politics. The Congress lost in Bihar because Lalu was more concerned about demonstrating his influence in his state rather than working with other UPA parties to support a consensus candidate. Lalu's counterproductive behavior is no surprise to those familiar with his personality.

¶8. (SBU) In Jharkhand, Marandi's victory as an independent is a sign that the people, fed up with corruption and five different governments in Jharkhand's six year existence, are looking for a leader who can move the paralyzed state forward. In Assam, the new AUDF party flexed its muscles to demonstrate the growing strength of the Muslim vote resulting from the demographic shift brought about by the influx of Bangladeshi migrants. This fracturing of the political milieu in Assam is likely to inhibit the GOI's efforts to tackle the continuing insurgency in the state. JARDINE